



# The Pipeline

## Kentuckians Favor Limits on State Role in Child Protection

*By Mike Jennings, CFC Communications*

Kentucky adults believe that sometimes government should intervene in families' lives on behalf of children, but they have strong reservations about the way government performs that role.

At the same time, Kentuckians confess they know little about child protective services—and they have no strong desire to know more.

Those findings came to light in a study of public perceptions of services to children at risk of abuse or neglect. To gather those perceptions, researchers convened eight focus groups after carefully choosing participants to mirror Kentucky's population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, region and socioeconomic status.

The study, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was the subject of a recent discussion on "State of Affairs," a public-affairs program on WFPL radio in Louisville.

"Kentucky is a lot more conscious about government intervention" than other states, said Gayle Tenenbaum, an Ohio-based researcher who coordinated the Kentucky project and parallel studies in California, Colorado, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and South Carolina.

"And there were actually some people in some focus groups who didn't think we should ever intervene," said Tenenbaum, the state coordinator for the National Network for Child Safety. She said that perception was more common in Kentucky and Colorado than elsewhere.

People feel families are breaking down, and among the causes they list divorce, single parenting, drugs, television, materialism, a decline in neighborliness



and lack of a spiritual life, Tenenbaum said.

She said focus group participants also complain that children are not well disciplined, in part because parents fear government reprisals if they punish their children. Some had the mistaken notion there were laws forbidding spanking.

Tenenbaum said there was a widely shared feeling that the demands made on family members' time have reached an unhealthy extreme. One of the most common comments in the focus groups, she said, was: "You hardly see a family eating dinner together any more."

Focus group participants generally agreed that, when families deteriorate to a point potentially harmful to children, government should step in. But many voiced reservations, Tenenbaum said.

Among their concerns, she said, were that intervention rarely helps, that investigations are often botched and that people with a grudge can get parents in trouble. Some also objected that what constitutes abuse or neglect is subject to widely varying interpretations, and that there's already enough government involvement in people's lives.

There was strong agreement that government should not intervene just because a child is being disciplined. Some also said parents and teachers fail to discipline children for fear they'll be accused of abuse.

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Tenenbaum said focus group participants have generally sympathetic views of child protection workers, believing them to be overworked and underpaid and to lack the resources they need to do their jobs.

The participants agreed that children are always harmed when they are removed from their homes, but that sometimes they could suffer greater harm if left there.

Tenenbaum said focus group participants were “pretty negative about foster care . . . in Kentucky as a whole,” but were more so in Boyd, Fayette, Laurel and Jefferson counties than in the other four focus-group locations—Davies, Kenton, Perry and Warren counties. Some participants described foster homes as overcrowded or inconsistent in quality, or said children are too often moved from one foster home to another.

She said many participants held mistaken beliefs about foster care, such as “that most of our foster parents are keeping children for the money,” that caseworkers never make unannounced visits to foster homes and that some homes house as many as 15 foster children.

Tenenbaum said participants agreed it’s better to place abused or neglected children with relatives than with strangers, but they voiced some concerns, including the belief that abuse runs in families. They also gave qualified approval to terminating parental rights when there’s no hope that children can safely be returned to their families.

Most participants were also leery of placing children with foster families in their home neighborhoods, a concept that is central to the “Family to Family” foster care pilot project now under way in Jefferson County. They objected that neighborhood placements made it easier for parents to “get at” a foster child, raised the risk of assault on children or

foster parents and made it likelier that children would be made fun of by peers.

Most focus group participants knew virtually nothing about what child protective service agencies actually do, what qualifications caseworkers must have or how law enforcement and the courts fit into the child protection system.

Many admitted they didn’t want to learn more about that system because the subject was unpleasant and irrelevant to their lives and they could

do little about other families. One participant commented, “I thank God I *don’t* need this information.”

Cabinet for Families and Children Secretary Viola Miller said it’s disappointing that so many people feel that way. While the subject of child abuse is unpleasant, with the right information ordinary citizens can indeed make a difference in keeping children safe, she said.

Among the steps they can take, she said, are: giving stressed families a much-needed break by taking care of their children; volunteering in a child crisis shelter or parent support program; organizing “safe houses” and other safety systems for their neighborhoods; and helping pregnant teen-agers learn parenting skills.

Miller said she understands public concerns about government intrusion in families’ lives but hopes those fears will lessen as people become familiar with her agency’s new mode of operation. The Cabinet has adopted a Comprehensive Family Services service model, in which families’ needs are addressed in a coordinated way and family members are treated as full partners.

“I guess what really resonated to me in this report was that families appreciate our help, but they want us out of their lives as quickly as possible,” Miller said. “And we want out of their lives as quickly as possible. So we share a common goal with the clients.”



## Photos with Santa Available for Pick Up

If you or your child had your photo taken with Santa in the CHR or Health Services Buildings, you can pick them up in the Health Services Secretary’s office.

Kay Hill is distributing the photos. She is located on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of the CHR Building in the heart of the CHS Secretary’s office. Kay can be reached at 564-7042.



*Mary Gaines, who retired from Vital Statistics in October of 2001, sits on Santa’s lap along with her grandson, Dylan. Dylan is the son of Patrick and Jamie Gaines.*

## The Basic Principles of Professional Behavior:

1. Preserve the integrity of others.
2. Practice active listening.
3. Involve others in problem solving.
4. Be accountable for your actions



*If you know someone who continually radiates the values projected by EAL, we want to know. Send items to:*  
[patricia.boler@mail.state.ky.us](mailto:patricia.boler@mail.state.ky.us)



## January Is Birth Defects Prevention Month

CHS Communications

January is Birth Defects Prevention Month and the Cabinet for Health Services has several programs that are addressing birth defects in Kentucky. They are part of Gov. Paul Patton's Early Childhood Development Initiative known as KIDS NOW.

"We must not neglect the development that takes place prenatally and in the first few years of life," said Patton. "It's very important that new moms are healthy so we can have healthy babies."

In Kentucky, more than 2,000 babies are affected by birth defects each year. The estimated lifetime cost to care for the number of U.S. children born with 18 common birth defects exceeds \$8 billion. Here are some ways to prevent birth defects along with programs that are a result of the KIDS NOW initiative:

- All women of childbearing age should be taking a daily multivitamin that includes folic acid, which reduces the risk of spina bifida. Adequate amounts of folic acid (400 micrograms daily) can prevent up to 70 percent of some kinds of serious birth defects. Local health departments are distributing free folic acid to women under the KIDS NOW program.

- Alcohol and street drugs should also be avoided during pregnancy. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, one of the leading causes of mental retardation, is 100

percent preventable. A KIDS NOW program has strengthened outreach efforts aimed at pregnant women with substance abuse issues by working with the 14 regional mental health/mental retardation boards, local health departments, private physician offices and district and circuit court judges.

- Smoking tobacco should be avoided during pregnancy. Limiting tobacco use reduces the chance of miscarriage. Dr. Rice Leach, the commissioner of public health, says mothers-to-be can reduce the number of low birth weight babies by 25 percent by avoiding tobacco during pregnancy. Under KIDS NOW, a home visitation program called HANDS provides assistance to new parents on how to quit smoking.

And this month, a "Healthy Babies" media campaign will start with TV and radio spots around the state urging women of childbearing years to stop smoking and drinking during pregnancy and to take vitamins.

Information about these programs can be obtained at your local health department or your regional mental health-mental retardation board.

To help track and study birth defects, the Department for Public Health oversees the Kentucky Birth Surveillance Registry. This statewide system identifies children with birth defects to assist in prevention and providing services.

"We hope these preventive steps will reduce the number of birth defects in Kentucky and lead to better outcomes for our children," said Dr. Steve Davis, director of the Division of Adult and Child Health.

*On Monday, January 21, we will celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. Look for a special article about Dr. King in next week's Pipeline.*



## Jordan Addresses Human Service Council



The CFC Ombudsman, our own Eleanor Jordan, will address the January meeting of the Franklin County Human Service Council at 9 a.m., Jan. 15 at the Hammon McClendon Youth Center on Walter Todd Drive. All local social service agencies and the public are invited to attend.



*By Patricia Boler, CFC Communications*

In this issue of Pipeline, we would like to introduce an outstanding employee with CFC, Ruth Henry. Ruth is Training Coordinator for Quality Central.

Ruth's work began with in 1988 when Eastern Kentucky University assigned her to the Division of Family Services Training Branch. Ruth served as a Training Aide supporting 10 trainers and the branch manager.

From Family Services, Ruth moved to the director's office in the Division of Family Services to support the Child Welfare Training Project manager and then director, Nancy Rawlings. Ruth returned to the Training Branch in 1991.

Throughout Ruth's career in CFC training, numerous changes have been made, including the addition of staff and more advanced technology. The Training Division now has over forty staff members that include administrative and management staff as well as trainers.

Ruth is responsible for scheduling Quality Central employees for CFC training events. To contact Ruth, call 564-9932 or send email to: [ruth.henry@mail.state.ky.us](mailto:ruth.henry@mail.state.ky.us)